Grenz and Franke's Post-Foundationalism
and the Religion Singularity

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Abstract: *Termed the "religion singularity" by Kenneth Howard, the habitual fragmentation of institutional Christianity has led to the exponential growth in denominations and worship centers despite the annual growth rate of new believers remaining the same. Howard has concluded that denominations are unlikely to survive this crisis, although worship centers are much more likely to survive if they are willing to be flexible. The purpose of this article is to identify the epistemic trends that have led to the destabilization of institutional Christianity over the last century, namely the shifting worldview from modernity to postmodernity, and how this shift has influenced the rise of nondenominational house church attendance in American Christianity.*

Introduction

IN *TRANSFORMING MISSION*, DAVID Bosch identified and defined six epochs of Christianity that have taken shape in the past 2,000 years, the last of which he calls "the emerging, ecumenical paradigm." Bosch explains that Christians in each era believed they were faithful to God's intent for mission, but the individual paradigms were profoundly different.[1] Concerning the present era, Bosch writes, "The Christian church in general and the Christian mission in particular are today confronted with issues they have never even dreamt of and which are crying out for responses that are both relevant to the times and in harmony with the essence of the Christian faith."[2] Nearly thirty years later, Kenneth Howard identified one of these new and unforeseen quandaries facing effective Christian mission in what he calls the "religion singularity." The idea is based on Ray Kurzweil's prediction that "the exponentially increasing processing power of artificial/machine intelligence would overtake the rate of increase of unaugmented human intelligence by the mid-twenty-first century … and would mark the end of humanity as we know

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[1] Bosch defines "mission" as referring "primarily to the *missio Dei* (God's mission), that is, God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world." He uses the term "Christian mission" to describe the participation of Christians in the *missio Dei*, such as engaging in the "realities of injustice, oppression, poverty, discrimination, and violence." He adds, "Mission includes evangelism as one of its essential dimensions [and is defined as] the proclamation of salvation in Christ to those who do not believe in him, calling them to repentance and conversion, announcing forgiveness of sin, and inviting them to become living members of Christ's earthly community and to begin a life of service to others in the power of the Holy Spirit" (David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991], 10–11).

[2] Ibid., 188.

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it."[3] In brief, Howard corresponds "singularity" to the exponential surge in Christian denominations and worship centers, especially in the last one hundred years. Noting that since the worldwide Christian growth rate is projected to remain the same, Howard forecasts a dramatic transformation of institutional Christianity.[4] Due to these projections and more, present-day Christians are forced to ask if their faith can survive in this latest epoch. Howard believes survival is possible, but only if the fragmentation of Christianity subsides. Thus, he recommends Christian leaders experiment with less building-centric worship centers.

The purpose of this article is to explain the epistemic undercurrents of the "religion singularity" as it pertains to the current era of Christian mission. In particular, twenty-first century Christians are observing the transition of its faith into a new epoch based on the shifting from modernity to postmodernity. After summarizing Howard's findings, the article will identify how this shifting worldview has also induced a change from the epistemic system of foundationalism to post-foundationalism, as well as how the change can produce the possibility for Christian mission to continue despite the collapse of institutional Christianity. In fact, recent trends in American Protestantism suggest that nondenominational house churches will become increasingly prominent in the post-foundationalist era.

A Summary of the Religion Singularity

Howard first explains that institutional Christianity is in a state of crisis. At the turn of the twentieth century, Christianity was represented by 1,600 denominations; but by the 1950s, there were 9,300.[5] Within just fifty years, Christianity split into six times the amount of denominations than it had in its first nineteen centuries of existence. The number continued to accelerate, becoming 34,200 at the turn of the twenty-first century and it grew even more to 45,000 by 2014.[6] It has been projected that either the influx of Christian denominations will plateau at 97,000 by the year 2100 or it will continue to accelerate to 240,000.[7] At the same time, the total number of worship centers has exponentially grown, as well. From approximately 400,000 centers in 1900 to one million in 1950, the number continued to climb to 3.5 million at the turn of the century and exceeded 4.7 million by 2014. It is also projected that the number of worship centers will grow to 7.5 million by 2025 and reach 66.3 million by the year 2100.[8]

What makes these numbers significant is that while the annual growth rate for Christianity continues to remain the same (1.32% growth), the number of believers is exceeded by both the growth in number of denominations (1.98%) and worship centers (2.4%).[9] Thus, the worldwide Christian population growth rate is 33% less than denominational fragmentation and 41% below the spread of worship centers. In the twentieth century alone, the number of denominational members dropped from 349,000 to 58,000 and may continue to decrease to 17,500 (95% less) by the end of the twenty-first century. Likewise, the number of Christian

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[3] Kenneth W. Howard, "The Religion Singularity: A Demographic Crisis Destabilizing and Transforming Institutional Christianity," *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 7, no. 2 (2017): 77, http://dx.doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/cgp/v07i02/77-93.

[4] Ibid., 77–78.

[5] Ibid., 82.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 83.

[8] Ibid., 83–84.

[9] Ibid., 84.

congregants per worship center has dropped from 1,395 to just 64 during the twentieth century.[10] These numbers are noteworthy when considering they comprise the total worldwide Christian population, including those not associated with a worship center or denomination. The numbers would actually be more destabilizing if they counted only denominational memberships.

Regardless, Howard proposes that the rapid fragmentation of Christianity will eventually lead to its institutional collapse. He employs the mathematical and technological term "singularity" to describe this phenomenon, which signifies "the point at which the results of an equation exceed finite limitation, accelerating toward infinity but never reaching it, such as when a constant is divided by numbers approaching zero."[11] Here, singularity involves three distinct states: a slow take off, rapid acceleration, and finally the point of no return ("singularity").[12] He predicts that denominations may not survive the singularity phenomenon, although worship centers may survive if they are willing to be more experimental and flexible in their operations.[13]

Understanding Religion Singularity

The data from Howard's article expresses the evolution of the Christian religion as it attempts to meet the unique needs of an increasingly postmodern world. Christianity has, in fact, gone through notable shifts in its history with the stated intention of being socially and spiritually effective. For many leaders, Christians should not be dismayed as new, unforeseen obstacles arise like the institutional crisis described by the religion singularity. As Christopher Wright reflects, "[Christians] may be challenged by swimming in the postmodern pool, but we need not feel out of our depth there."[14] The question then becomes, What exactly has Howard identified epistemically with the singularity effect? This section will attempt to address the question by identifying how a foundationalist epistemology had influenced institutional Christianity and how reactions to foundationalism eventually led to the religion singularity.

Foundationalist Influences on the Religion Singularity

In *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, Stanley Grenz and John Franke surveyed the historical and theological factors that may have led to the fragmentation of denominational Christianity. The authors explain how the postmodern context of the twenty-first century has characteristically rejected the foundationalism that typified Enlightenment epistemology, resulting in a post-foundationalist religiosity.[15] Based on their understanding of the paradigm shift from modernity to postmodernity, as well as from foundationalism to post-foundationalism, future researchers can determine the epistemic undercurrent that may have resulted in the institutional destabilization of the Christian religion.

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[10] Howard, "The Religion Singularity," 85.

[11] Ibid., 80.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 87.

[14] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 46.

[15] Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 28.

To begin, the Enlightenment became known as the "Age of Reason" and was significantly influenced by the philosophical work of René Descartes, who sought a "foundation" from which to construct all knowledge. He doubted everything he believed to be true until he determined that the only thing he could be certain of was his own existence, resulting in his famous dictum, "I think, therefore, I am."[16] A major consequence of Descartes' doubting was the epistemic system of foundationalism. This bottom-up approach to knowledge holds that some beliefs are more basic ("foundational") than others, making the entire system consist of three primary features: 1) basic beliefs form the bedrock of all future nonbasic beliefs; 2) these nonbasic beliefs derive from the indisputability of the basic beliefs; and 3) the subsequent nonbasic beliefs then receive the same epistemic certainty as their foundational counterparts. Here, the foundationalist goal is to ground the entire edifice of human knowledge upon invincible and incorrigible certainty.[17]

Soon, Christians adopted epistemic foundationalism and manifested its effects in different ways during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the one hand, the foundation of theological liberalism emphasized the experience of individual believers, while on the other, the foundation of theological conservatism emphasized an inerrant Bible that held infallible historical and spiritual truths. As each side averred that their particular foundation was epistemically superior to the other, a schism occurred in Western Protestant Christianity.[18] Eventually, the evangelical movement's adoption of foundationalism built its own edifice upon a narrow sense of orthodoxy, which produced "fundamentalist" Christians who adhered to a legalistic system defined by its dissociation from the culture (e.g. abstaining from alcohol and movie theaters). While they professed theological orthodoxy, these (neo-)evangelicals distanced themselves from humanitarian efforts (i.e. the Social Gospel) because of a fear of compromising orthodoxy with liberalism and the perceived threat of de-emphasizing personal piety.[19]

Ultimately, Grenz and Franke concluded that this style of theological foundationalism had intensified theological divides, eventually leading to a cascade of Christian fragmentation. "Today we find significant differences not only between these two groups but also within them, differences regarding a host of theological issues."[20] The natural result of this fragmentation is the exponential increase in denominations and worship centers (the "religion singularity"). Thus, the effect of Christianity rapidly fragmenting into competing institutions has become more noticeable as the current epistemic paradigm shift into post-foundationalism has forced some believers to reimagine the nature of "effective" Christian mission in the twenty-first century.

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[16] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 31.

[17] Ibid., 30. See also, Ferdinand Deist, "Post-Modernism and the Use of Scripture in Theological Argument: Footnotes to the Apartheid Theology Debate," *Neotestamentica* 28, no. 3 (1994): 253–63.

[18] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 33–38.

[19] Significantly, by the last quarter of the twentieth century, evangelical scholars and theologians began to take very seriously the importance of social justice by balancing their former overt emphasis on conversion. This trend has positively affected the missional practice of (post-)conservatives in the twenty-first century. Cf. Frank E. Gaebelein, "Evangelicals and Social Concern," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25, no. 1 (March 1982): 17–22; Brian Steensland and Philip Goff, eds., *The New Evangelical Social Engagement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199329533.001.0001; Ronald J. Sider, "Evangelicals and Social Justice," in *Evangelicals Around the World: A Global Handbook for the 21st Century*, ed. Brian C. Stiller et al. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 128–33; and David P. Gushee and Justin Phillips, "Moral Formation and the Evangelical Voter: A Report from the Red States," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 26, no. 2 (2006): 23–60, https://doi.org/10.5840/jsce20062623.

[20] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 4.

An Epistemic Transition

Over the course of the last century, and especially in the last several decades, foundationalism has increasingly lost its influence on Western culture. A growing number of scholars have recognized the growth and popularity of postmodernity and its post-foundationalist approach to religion.[21] Significantly, post-foundationalism does not rebuff the fundamental idea of foundationalism that certain (basic) beliefs can act as an anchor for other derived beliefs. For example, some evangelical philosophers, such as Alvin Plantinga, reject the idea of "strong foundationalism" because it relegates religious belief to a nonbasic status. However, these philosophers "do not deny categorically the validity of the foundationalist search for basic beliefs."[22] Rather, they view the church as its own properly basic epistemic community from which to construct Christian theology.[23]

In contrast to the effects of the Enlightenment, where theology became a strictly academic affair, post-foundationalists now seek to return theology back to the church, believing that Christian theology is "an activity of the community that gathers around Jesus the Christ."[24] Accordingly, post-foundational theology may be understood as a mosaic or tapestry that more graciously embraces softly opposing theological differences (e.g. spiritual gifts, mode of baptism, etc.) rather than allow peripheral issues to cause division.[25] Post-foundational churches will therefore be more specifically characterized by the collective theological background of its members rather than a commitment to one particular denomination. Hence, the decreasing amount of denominational commitment and the exponential increase of worship centers are likely to result, in part, from a gradually post-foundational theological epistemology.[26]

Responding to the Religion Singularity

Trends in American Protestantism already demonstrate significant changes in the commitment of individuals to particular denominational affiliations based on the following

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[21] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 38–42, 46. Cf. K. F. Godfrey, "Postfoundationalist Rationality and Progress in the Theology of Religious Conversion," *The Asia Journal of Theology* 20, no. 1 (April 2006): 142–54 and Deist, "Post-Modernism and the Use of Scripture," 253–63.

[22] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 47. See for example, Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16–93.

[23] Cf. Archie J. Spencer, "Culture, Community and Commitments: Stanley J. Grenz on Theological Method," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57, no. 3 (2004): 338–60, http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/s0036930604000274.

[24] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 48.

[25] Darren M. Slade, "Religious Homophily and Biblicism: A Theory of Conservative Church Fragmentation," *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 9, no. 1 (2019): 13–28, http://dx.doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/cgp/v09i01/13-28. While foundational theology could be portrayed as the steps required to build a house (for example, by first laying a foundation and building upon it), post-foundational theology is understood as a systemic body working in unison to accomplish effective ministry. See John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 30.

[26] Cf. Jan-Olav Henriksen, "Researching Theological Normativity: Some Critical and Constructive Suggestions," *Studia Theologica* 60, no. 2 (2006): 207–20, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00393380601010185 and M. C. de Lange, "Reflections on Methodology and Interdisciplinarity in the Postmodern Dialogue between Theology and the Natural Sciences," *Acta Theologica* 27, no. 2 (2007): 44–62, http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/actat.v27i2.5499.

factors: 1) the long-term decline of membership in liberal-leaning denominations; 2) the short-term plateau or decline of membership in conservative denominations despite long-term increases; and 3) the short-term growth of nondenominational membership.[27] Since the 1970s, Protestant Christianity has decreased in percentage of the U.S. population from 62% to 51%, though it has grown numerically by 28 million people.[28] The change is linked, in part, to the long-term decline of mainline denominations while congregations with a more conservative theology have seen steady increases.[29] For instance, the United Church of Christ (Congregationalist), a traditionally mainline denomination, has seen a decline of 52% from 2,070,413 members in 1965 to 998,906 members in 2012. Likewise, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) decreased by 47% from 3,304,321 members to 1,760,200 during the same time span. On the other hand, conservative groups like The Church of God in Christ has increased by 1,194% in membership. Other more conservative denominations include the Presbyterian Church in America with a 790% increase and the Southern Baptist Convention at 46%.[30]

Nevertheless, more recent research demonstrates a decreasing commitment of American Christians to both mainline and non-mainline congregations. The Office of the General Assembly for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shows that the declining number of members has slowed (but not stopped entirely). The most recent statistics in 2017 show a net loss of nearly 68,000 members since 2016, leaving the new total at 1,415,053.[31] Also, the status of the United Church of Christ membership is currently 853,778 (-1.2%) since 2012.[32] Equally, conservative evangelical groups have seen plateaued or declining membership from 2007 to 2014. During these years, Pentecostal and Adventist groups have grown minimally at +0.2% and +0.1% respectively, whereas others have seen slight decreases, such as Restorationists (-0.2%) and Holiness (-0.4%) groups. Baptist denominations had the greatest loss among conservatives with a decrease of 1.8%, though mainline groups collectively decreased by 3.6% total.[33]

Today, post-liberal and post-conservative Christians have each taken strides to overcome the detrimental effects of foundationalism and to revise Christian mission in a postmodern context. The former has been influential in the cultivation of Emergence Christianity (EC) and the latter for what is a type of missional church planting movement. Both practice postmodern ministry by embracing a post-foundational religiosity, which attempts to halt theological division at the congregational level. In fact, the mounting influence of EC and missional church planting may correlate to the increase in nondenominational church

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[27] See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 156–283.

[28] Joe Carter, "Factchecker: Are All Christian Denominations in Decline?," The Gospel Coalition, March 17, 2015, thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-are-all-christian-denominations-in-decline/.

[29] Cf. David Millard Haskell, Kevin N. Flatt, and Stephanie Burgoyne, "Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy," *Review of Religious Research* 58, no. 4 (2016): 515–41, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s13644-016-0255-4 and Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Why Strict Churches Are Strong," *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1180–1211, http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/230409.

[30] Carter, "Factchecker."

[31] See Presbyterian Church (USA), *2017 Comparative Summaries* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly 2017), oga.pcusa.org/section/churchwide-ministries/stats/denominational-statistics/.

[32] See *United Church of Christ: A Statistical Profile* (Cleveland, OH: UCC, 2018), https://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/2018-UCC-Statistical-Profile.pdf.

[33] Gregory Smith, *America's Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015), accessed March 26, 2019, https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

attendance.[34] In the U.S., for example, 194,000 people attended a nondenominational church in 1990, but this demographic significantly increased to 8 million by 2008.[35] Research also shows that nondenominational church affiliation continued to increase from 2007 to 2014 by 1.7% among all U.S. adults and 4% among Protestants.[36] This increase appears to parallel the increase in Christians who are at least sympathetic to the postmodern matrix.[37]

With the steady growth of the religiously unaffiliated, however, adherents of post-foundational nondenominational churches will likely need to emphasize both the need for missional practices (e.g. addressing social injustice, poverty, and violence), as well as effective proselytizing tactics to restabilize the Christian church.[38] During this process, it is important to note Howard's belief that church leaders should experiment with less building-centric worship centers in order to overcome the collapse of institutional Christianity.[39] With this in mind, it is suggestive that house churches are increasingly becoming a viable option for such experimentation. In fact, house churches are growing with over one-quarter (26.3%) of American Christians in 2009 meeting in private homes instead of traditional church buildings.[40] For many, in fact, the house church movement offers a needed corrective to American religiosity that allows for a more simplistic and community-oriented approach to Christian faith.[41]

Conclusion

As institutional Christianity enters more fully into its latest ecumenical epoch, there will be significant alterations that rightly cause many to ask if the Christian religion can still thrive or even survive. Kenneth Howard notes that the collapse of institutional Christianity will be one of the most crucial obstacles for believers to overcome. Although the religion will likely appear very different in the near future from its institutionalized past, Christians still have the potential to maximize their effectiveness in the postmodern context. In particular, post-foundational

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[34] For details on the EC movement, see Michael Clawson and April Stace, eds., *Crossing Boundaries, Redefining Faith: Interdisciplinary Perspectives On the Emerging Church Movement* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016). Cf. Mark S. Medley, "Catholics, Baptists, and the Normativity of Tradition: A Review Essay," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 119–29.

[35] Scott Thumma, *A Report On the 2010 National Profile of U.S. Nondenominational and Independent Churches* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2010), http://hirr.hartsem.edu/cong/nondenominational-churches-national-profile-2010.html.

[36] See Smith, *America's Changing Religious Landscape*.

[37] Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey C. Murphy, and Mark Nation, eds., *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994) and Nancey C. Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996).

[38] Bosch identifies both as quintessential in what has defined proper mission in every paradigm (Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 8–11).

[39] Howard, "The Religion Singularity," 87.

[40] Ed Stetzer, "Counting People Who Attend House Churches," *Christianity Today*, September 3, 2009, https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2009/september/counting-people-who-attend-house-churches.html.

[41] Cf. Jervis David Payne, "A Glimpse into the Missional House Churches of America," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 19 (Winter 2008): 87–98 and Rad Zdero, "The Apostolic Strategy of House Churches for Mission Today," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (July 2011): 346–53.

churches will need to take account of the epistemic shifts occurring in theology and identify how to maintain a stable identity while denominations and congregations continue to fragment around them. Of course, only time will tell whether the epistemic change from foundationalism to post-foundationalism will, in fact, curb the rapid division occurring in Christianity or if it will only proliferate the ever-increasing percentage of religious "nones" in the world.

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